

Summary

- Children who have been criminal exploited are victims of child abuse. To better protect children from criminal exploitation we need to focus our response on safeguarding, rather than criminalisation. Barnardo's is calling for the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill to be amended to introduce a **statutory definition of 'criminal exploitation'** to help identify victims and make sure they are supported appropriately.
- No one agency can tackle serious violence alone. Barnardo's welcomes Part 2, Chapter 1, which will introduce new duties on specified authorities to collaborate and plan to prevent and reduce serious violence. This is an important step towards focusing on the root causes – especially related to young people. To ensure this approach works it will require local solutions with a national oversight; interdependent partnership working with local agencies, charities and the private sector; and long-term investment.

1. Protecting children from criminal exploitation

A) What is child criminal exploitation?

- **Child criminal exploitation is child abuse.** Children who are criminally exploited are trafficked, exploited or coerced into committing crimes such as carrying drugs or weapons. These children can also be threatened and blackmailed, subjected to physical, emotional or sexual abuse, and/or at risk of serious violence.
- Children can be exploited as **young as 9**. In 2019, the Children's Commissioner for England estimated that there were **27,000** children at high risk of gang exploitation who had not been identified by services; and a further 120,000 children – **1 in 25** of all young people experience broader risk factors linked to exploitation.¹ **The number of 'children in need' assessments that identified gangs as a factor increased by 34% in 2020 compared to 2019.**²

Thomas, aged 16, is autistic and attends Barnardo's Meadows School. Concerns were raised at school about Thomas's welfare when a young man who was lodging with his family was stabbed in front of Thomas. Further investigation revealed that the house had been "cuckooed" – it was being used by an organised criminal gang to help supply drugs to the area. The Headmaster made a referral for Thomas to be supported by police and social services.

*Name changed

B) Impact of COVID-19 on child criminal exploitation

- Throughout the pandemic, **gangs have not stopped they've adapted.** Young people have been made to look like key workers to continue delivering drugs;

¹ children's commissioner

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and where the demand for drugs has decreased children have been exploited to steal expensive cars and high-quality alcohol.

- Last July, **one in five** (24%) Barnardo's frontline workers said they had supported a child or young person they thought was being coerced, deceived or manipulated into criminal activity. And **15%** said they thought the first lockdown led to more children and young people getting involved in serious violence and exploitation.²
- With children spending extended periods of time outside of school with a lack of routine, structure and supervision they are vulnerable to exploitation. On top of this, many families are struggling to pay bills or put food on the table - vulnerabilities gangs can prey on when targeting young people who are desperate to find 'easy' ways to make money.

See, Hear, Respond, a programme led by Barnardo's and funded by DfE, supported a 16-year-old boy and his mum who, when referred before Christmas, were highly distressed having been placed in a Bed & Breakfast as the boy had just exited a gang who were criminally exploiting him. They were both anxious, scared, had little money and struggled to communicate with statutory agencies. Youth workers involved in See, Hear, Respond, worked with them to develop safety plans, secure emergency fund, and coordinate engagement with statutory services to put in place a multi-agency protection plan and secure permanent accommodation.

C) Transforming our response to child criminal exploitation

- Often children who have been criminal exploited go **unidentified and unsupported** by services until they are caught by the police or arrive at A&E, at which point they are often **viewed as perpetrators**.
- Children who have been or are at risk of criminal exploitation are **victims in need of safeguarding**.
- However, the current system for safeguarding children is centred around risk or harm in the home and is not set up identify risk in the wider community such as criminal exploitation.
- **Barnardo's is calling for the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill to be amended to introduce a statutory definition of 'criminal exploitation'**. This would:
 - Create a framework to ensure children who have been exploited can access support either by being recognised as a 'child in need' or by making it easier for these children to be referred through the National Referral Mechanism (NRM)³.
 - Create a consistent understanding of criminal exploitation amongst public authorities, enabling them to identify and support children as victims.

2. Support for multi-agency working to tackle serious violence

- In the year ending March 2020, there were 46,000 offences involving a knife or sharp instruments – the highest level in 10 years. This issue disproportionately affects young people.

³ National Referral Mechanism was established in the [Modern Slavery Act 2015](#).

- No one agency can tackle serious violence alone. Barnardo's welcomes Part 2, Chapter 1, which will introduce new duties on specified authorities - including local government, criminal justice, health and social care, and the police - to collaborate and plan to prevent and reduce serious violence, in consultation with education, prison and youth justice authorities.
- To make sure this duty is a success in practice, the Government must ensure:
 - **Local solutions with national oversight.** This is vital to tackle issues such as 'county lines', a driver of serious violence, that run across the country not just within local government areas.
 - Encourages interdependent partnership working between local agencies, **charities and the private sector** who know their local communities and work with them to design solutions.
 - Commit to **long-term sustainable funding** to invest the resources needed to tackle serious violence, but also to build the trust with communities that is needed to achieve change.

During the first lockdown Child B started to hang out with other young people, who are known to the police as potentially being criminally exploited by a serious organised crime group, and he was considered at risk too. Over the last year he was excluded (fixed term) from school a number of times and there was concern that he wouldn't return to school. His mother is a key worker and was worried about leaving him alone whilst she went to work. He started accessing a Barnardo's service for children at risk of criminal exploitation who provided him with one-to-one support to talk through his experiences with the group, develop an exit strategy, connect him with a local youth club, and work with the school to develop a tailored return to help regulate behaviours and build positive relationships with school staff.

About Barnardo's

Barnardo's is the UK's largest children's charity. In 2019/2020, we supported 358,800 children, young people, parents and carers, through more than 800 services and partnerships. For more information contact Claire Stewart, UK Public Affairs Manager, on claire.stewart@barnardos.org.uk.